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Preserving the Power of Antibiotics

By Doug Burgoyne, Pharm.D., Manager of Pharmacy Services, IHC Health Plans

Antibiotics have changed the course of history. In the era before antibiotics, people died of simple infections that were caused by common bacteria. If we don't use antibiotics correctly, we run the risk of returning to that era.

Antibiotics are powerful medicines. Penicillin, the first antibiotic to be used widely, was discovered in 1928 by Alexander Fleming, a British microbiologist. By 1944 penicillin was available to the public, and it saved many lives during World War II. The general public regarded penicillin and other antibiotics as miracle drugs. Today we have more than 100 antibiotics that a doctor can use to treat bacterial infections.

Despite this medical progress, one thing has not changed over the past 70 years. Antibiotics **do not** cure viruses that cause colds and the flu. In fact, using antibiotics to treat viruses increases something called "antibiotic resistance." Every time you take an antibiotic, it destroys bacteria in your body. However, using antibiotics too often or for the wrong reasons can make bacteria change so that antibiotics can no longer destroy the bacteria. When the bacteria survive and multiply to cause more harm, this creates antibiotic resistance. To stop harmful bacteria and prevent the spread of infections, you need to use antibiotics correctly.

Things You Can Do to Prevent Antibiotic Resistance

- ▶ Talk with your doctor about antibiotic resistance.
- ▶ Ask whether an antibiotic is likely to be beneficial for your illness.
- ▶ Ask what else you can do to feel better quicker.
- ▶ Do not take an antibiotic for a viral infection, like a cold or the flu.
- ▶ Take an antibiotic exactly as the doctor tells you. Don't stop taking it when you start to feel better.
- ▶ Do not save leftover antibiotics to use at another time.
- ▶ Do not take an antibiotic that is prescribed for someone else.



Things You Can Do to Prevent the Spread of Germs and Sickness

Get a flu shot. A vaccine against colds hasn't been developed because many types of viruses can cause colds. But the flu vaccine remains the best way to prevent and control the flu.

Wash your hands. Both colds and the flu can be passed through coughing, sneezing and touching surfaces. Touching your nose, mouth and eyes with contaminated hands makes it easy for cold and flu viruses to enter the body. According to the American Society for Microbiology, a national survey found that Americans were most likely to say they wash their hands after changing a diaper and before handling food. Most, however, said they don't wash their hands after coughing and sneezing. The CDC recommends that you scrub your hands regularly with warm, soapy water for about 20 seconds.

Limit exposure to infected people. Sometimes people are infected with a virus, but don't know it because they haven't experienced symptoms yet. If possible, avoid people who you know have colds and the flu.

Keep infants away from crowds for the first few months of life. "This is especially important for premature babies who may have underlying abnormalities like lung disease and heart disease," says Larry Pickering, M.D., a fellow of the American Academy of Pediatrics and a pediatrician in Atlanta. Sometimes keeping your distance is too difficult—such

as parents who can't help holding and kissing their sick kids. If this is the case, then in addition to frequent hand washing, keep surfaces like doorknobs, computer keyboards, telephones and other frequently touched surfaces clean with a virus-killing disinfectant. You can find these disinfectants at your local grocery store. A solution of one part bleach mixed with ten parts water is also effective.

Doing our part. A group of Utah organizations has banded together to form the Utah Alliance Working for Antibiotic Resistance Education (Utah AWARE). Utah AWARE is a coalition of insurance companies, state health agencies, professional health care organizations and drug manufacturers—led by IHC Health Plans—that is helping to teach the public about antibiotic resistance. For example, they teach children in daycare centers how important and easy it is to stop the spread of germs by hand washing.

Utah AWARE's goal is to spread the word that antibiotics are not effective against viruses like colds and the flu. Utah AWARE's public education campaign features the slogan, "Use the Right Drug for the Right Bug." You will see billboards along I-15 with messages, such as "Preserve the Power of Antibiotics" and "Cough, Sniffle, Sneeze—No Antibiotics Please." These ads will run throughout the cold and flu season.

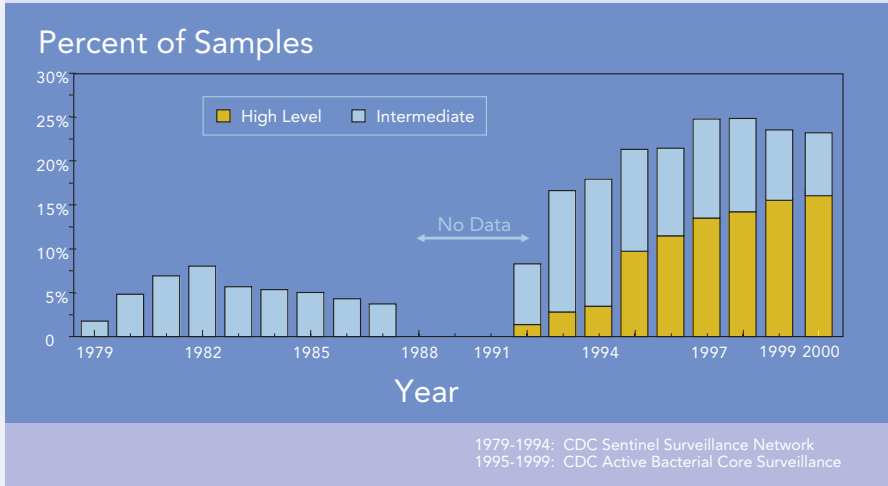
For more information, visit www.utahaware.com.

Viruses Versus Bacteria

There are two main types of germs that cause most infections. These are viruses and bacteria.

Viruses cause:	Bacteria cause:
All colds and the flu	Some sinus infections
Most coughs and sore throats	Strep throat
Most ear infections	Urinary tract infections
Taking antibiotics won't help. They can't kill viruses.	Taking antibiotics will help. They do kill specific bacteria.

Penicillin-Resistant Pneumococcal Infections in the United States, 1979-1999



This graph shows an increasing trend in antibiotic resistance during a 20-year period. Some bacteria with "intermediate resistance" can still be treated with common antibiotics, while highly resistant strains are more difficult to treat.